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ABSTRACT

Organizational change at Wells College, New York, is traced from 1876-1905 in relation to women's role in higher education. This excerpt of a larger study indicates how women worked within a female college that had male authority figures at a time in which there were strong notions about proper feminine behavior. The college was intended to train women to be wives for college-educated men and to fulfill social prescriptions of the nineteenth century. Gradually by the late nineteenth century women no longer felt fitted only for moral leadership roles in the home but began to enter the new fields of social work, nursing, and library science. Courses such as sociology, economics, government, and anthropology were gradually added. Internal changes at Wells College also occurred, most important of which was a gradual shift from male to female dominance in the governance of the school. The first woman principal, hired in 1876, employed self-abnegation and passive-agressive strategies as covert attempts to gain power. Although temporary failures sometimes resulted, Wells College evolved a female subculture whose members involved themselves in the affairs of the school as policy-makers, faculty, and concerned alumnae. Conflicts with the male presidency of the school, whose perceptions of women's roles were restrictive, are considered. (SW)

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DIVERGENT REALITIES: The Wells College Experience, 1876-1905

This paper on Divergent Realities as they relate to organizational change at Wells College is part of a larger historical study analyzing the intent, reality, and outcomes in a women's institution during the years when higher education for women developed in the United States. Wells College, located in Aurora, New York, was the second college in the country chartered exclusively for the education of women. The larger study, as this excerpt demonstrates, sought to increase knowledge about how women provided meaning for their lives without openly challenging dominant notions about "proper" feminine behavior, focused on women as actors in their own lives, and noted the effect of male authority figures at a female college. The discernible gap at Wells College between prestige, power, and authority enables us to recognize the outlines of our own time.

Anthropologists, by analyzing the differences between male and female socialization processes, have isolated the activities and factors that determine adult behavior. Such an approach for historical studies, aimed at understanding the functions women performed, the ways women were socialized, and the informal structures that operated within the educational context, yield more insight than studies aimed at traditional discussions of power, authority, and influence. For example, for men, power and authority are fundamentally linked, whereas for women, historically, power has been associated with inaccessibility to authority. Therefore, the ends women sought to maximize often eluded description because they lacked public cultural form.

Through the careful use of diaries, letters, and official records educational and cultural historians now go beyond the ideal values espoused by prescriptive literature to ascertain the real values transmitted by the family, the church, the community, and the schools.[1] Such studies will have no less significance if the focus is on the institutions developed by

and for women or on the role of women as teachers, students, and administrators. In addition, focusing on the educational institutions developed for and by women helps resolve the difficult problems posed by defining and measuring female impact, achievement, and contribution. The study of women's progress or lack thereof in academic settings; their ability to be admitted to institutions at the same time they were denied authority; and their separate, unequal status with analagous men, make it possible to develop prototypes for understanding power and authority as it affected women.

One summer day in 1866 two Victorian businessmen, Henry Wells and Edwin Barber Morgan, paced the field across from the home Wells had built in Aurora, New York. They were pacing the area for "Main Building", the first building on the campus they were constructing.[2] Their motives in planning such a project reflected the public and private values of both men. Certainly, the conservative and religious motives of Henry Wells, hitherto best known for his successful endeavors in the express business, played a part in attracting students and their families to the new school. Mr. Wells's complex vision of a college was of a "home" that would combine the private virtues of that institution with the academic standards of the best male colleges. Henry Wells <u>intended</u> to: train young women to exert the kind of moral "influence" so touted by the prescriptive literature of the time, prevent women from seeking the vote, and train wives for college-educated men.[3]

Henry Wells was an innovator and a worker but E. B. Morgan provided the necessary financial skills and business acumen to insure the success of their myriad enterprises: The American Express Company; Wells, Fargo, and Company; the Aurora Bank; and Wells College. Aurora's most illustrious

citizen Morgan perceived the school not only as a monument to his friend but also as an asset to the community that received so much of his time and energy.

During the fledgling years, the original intentions of the founders; providing academic excellence, educating women in the social prescriptions of the nineteenth century, and training women to be wives for college-educated men, remained unchanged. In their joint efforts to create a safe educational environment for young women, Henry Wells and E. B. Morgan followed the mold of men who valued women being able to manage useful, purposeful, but constrained lives. Their conservative impulses led to the creation of an in loco parentis institution, provided an outlet for their philanthropic desires, and enabled them to see Wells College as a monument to their efforts. Unknowingly, they contributed to the developing female demands for autonomy and authority even within the confines of "home" and "family".

Gradually, there was a change in the reality of the school, and this, in turn, altered the self-perceptions of Wells women about the role their education would play in their lives. By the late nineteenth century Wells women no longer perceived of themselves as beings fitted only for moral leadership roles in the home or in the nonpaid benevolent associations designed to bring about the regeneration of a decadent society. Wells women began to enter the new fields of social work, nursing, and library science.[4] These changes were partially the result of larger societal events which were reflected in the college curriculum. Courses such as sociology, economics, government, and anthropology were gradually added. By 1913 a graduate concluded, "We are about to begin our biggest work--a work of translating and making a practical application of what we recently have been studying."[5]

However, Wells College underwent internal change during this time period also. Most importantly there was a gradual shift from male to female dominance in the governance of the school. The key figure in the transition was Helen Fairchild Smith, the lady principal hired in 1876. Like the "domestic feminists"

so influential in the earlier seminary movement Helen Fairchild Smith sensed in her appointment the opportunity for personal advancement and successfully joined her own needs and those of the school in order to enhance feminine social authority. Study of such individual women in specific collegiate institutions reveals that the experience of many women in higher education continued for some time to reflect the earlier successful strategy developed by leaders in the seminary movement: subversion of intent in order to promote the advancement of women and the enlargement of their role. At Wells College, certainly, the shift in governance from male to female figures subverted the founders' intentions of socializing women in the canons of nineteenth century piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, thus re-enforcing the earlier strategies for women seeking power.

It is important to note, however, that the continued use by Helen Fairchild Smith of self-abnegation and passive-aggressive strategies, i. e., the explicit behaviors employed by these women, sometimes resulted in temporary failures. Smith's covert attempts at manipulations were always subject to manipulation by others, usually male authority figures who, because of their public power, were able to employ more direct means to achieve their ends.

Nevertheless, under Smith's tutelage, Wells College evolved a female subculture whose members involved themselves in the affairs of the school as policy makers, faculty, and concerned alumnae. During Smith's tenure, Henry Wells's concepts of "home" and "family" were expanded to include public roles for Wells alumnae, particularly in the governance of the college. With the support and authority granted by the board of trustees, Helen Fairchild Smith as principal, dean, and member of the executive committee of the board of trustees, was instrumental in creating the institutional forms of the college even though the presidency of the school remained in the hands of male authority figures whose perceptions of the socialization process

remained unchanged. By the 1890s, the academic environment at Wells reflected scholariness comparable to the best male institutions, but it was contained within a social environment designed by women to preserve that which was perceived as best about feminine values. No man governing the school would ever understand this distinction to the satisfaction of Helen Fairchild Smith. She sincerely believed that women, better than men, knew what was "good" for young women, socially and academically. The frequent clashes between Dean Smith and the male power figures at the school, while often couched in terms of "upgrading" or "improving" the college, usually reflected gender conflict over governance. Wells was, and would remain, distinct from its male counterparts. The personal and professional evolution of Helen Fairchild Smith reflects how this transition from concepts of female seminary versus male college to a distinctly women's college took place.

The day-to-day activities of the dean, as revealed by her diaries and letters, document the fact that Smith, like the college she served for so long, grew from an insecure, ambiguous being to become a complex and contradictory, but nevertheless integrated, entity. Helen Fairchild Smith's values and character were shaped by the prescriptions surrounding women's behavior in mid-nineteenth century America. Her earliest diaries, dated 1864, reveal that, at the age of twenty-eight, she was a victim of middle-class idleness practicing the recommended lifestyle for a Victorian woman. Her diary entries are testament to the "private" rather than "public" view such women had of their lives.[6]

In 1876, at the age of forty, Smith became the third lady principal of Wells College. Her own mother, "Madame" Smith, was frequently with her in Aurora, and her presence served as a buttress for the growing personal authority of Helen Fairchild Smith. The customs that developed around Madame Smith reflected a female culture that was developing at Wells College

complete with a heroine. If in the present time there is a tendency to trivialize larger, traumatic events so they can be dealt with psychologically, in the nineteenth century, women enlarged the trivial in order to give meaning to lives often isolated from the larger events of the time and to give importance to the events central to the lives of women.[7]

In 1887, Helen Fairchild Smith became the second woman to serve on the board of trustees. In 1894 she was named dean of the college, the first to hold that title. She continued for some time to serve as a faculty member teaching English literature. Helen Fairchild Smith became the connecting link for single female faculty, faculty wives, trustees" wives, and important alumnae. The network thus created functioned through her social calls, her frequent "interviews" with faculty, and her voluminous correspondence with alumnae. In addition, she used social events such as concerts, lectures, and commencements to hold "spontaneous" gatherings in her parlors.[8]

In the summer of 1888, Main Building, the first building on campus and the one that housed students and single female faculty, burned. During the crisis that ensued, Smith's authority and the developing female network became visible for the first time. Women, particularly early alumnae, played a significant part in rescuing the school after the fire. For these women, Helen Fairchild Smith came to personify their feelings of loyalty and devotion to their alma mater. During this period, Dean Smith further refined her strategy of cultivating close ties with alumnae and this led to other successes for her on campus. She was especially solicitous of alumnae who could exert pressure at the school. Following the crisis dictated by the fire, within Smith's small domain, power, as traditionally defined by salary, prestige, and decision making authority, was hers.

Students were not part of the developing female structure, although Smith certainly achieved with them a social motherhood that had been denied her

biologically. This concept for her, however, involved discipline, instruction by example, and a rigid adherence to social decorum. She does not seem to have been overly fond of the students while they were directly under her charge and, similarly, the students were not overly fond of her while they were still on campus.[9] However, as time and distance mellowed both, affection sometimes characterized Smith's relationships with younger alumnae and they, in turn, began to value her influence.

Of the men who had responsibility for governing the school, her favorite was Henry A. Morgan, the weak youngest son of E. B. Morgan. Her relationships with the presidents were characterized throughout her tenure by a dearth of positive comments. During the summer of 1894, in the interim between the retirement of an ailing president and the appointment of a new president, she conducted all official correspondence for the college and signed many of her letters, "Helen Fairchild Smith, Acting President."[10] Conflict about her authority and power emerged with the arrival of the new president, Dr. Waters, in the Fall of 1894.

By that date the Wells faculty consisted of thirteen women and five men. The eleven single women living in Main Building were Smith's closest friends and associates. Two members of the group, Marie Jeanneret, and Annie A. Wood, brought Smith to open warfare with President Waters. In July of 1896 Smith received a letter from Dr. Waters about a meeting to discuss the fate of the two instructors.[11] Smith wrote a letter requesting the list of the grievances against Jeanneret and Wood. She wrote both women and also sent letters to President Waters and the chairman of the board of trustees requesting a change of the meeting. Her assertive behavior at this point attested to her assumptions about her own authority in such matters. In August, Smith attended a religious retreat at a resort in the Catskills where she discussed the situation with collegues. Women such as Smith, self-conscious about their role as pioneer female educators, had a network of their own and

were skilled at political strategies. However, President Waters had been laying the groundwork for the confrontation and was able to catch the recently vacationing Smith offguard. The meeting about the case was held in his office rather than in the Dean's parlors where such meetings normally occurred. He came with a "paper" full, Smith said, "of primarily personal invective against the two instructors."[12]

Dr. Waters was operating within a male-defined power struggle. Dean Smith's power rested, despite her titles, with a personal authority she had developed and expanded over the years. When this crisis came, her power would not translate into the public authority necessary for the protection of her two friends. Women, particularly those in situations like Smith, simultaneously experience(d) oppression and power, subordination and influence. Helen Fairchild Smith discovered this paradoxical quality in her role, to her chagrin, during this controversy. The two instructors were dismissed.

It now seemed to Smith that her authority and role were being challenged on every front.[13] Her relationship with Dr. Waters reached its nadir. She openly and frequently commented on his constant "unfortunate remarks", a proclivity of his substantiated by other faculty members.[14]

Yet Smith was still dean of Wells College, able to exercise authority in meaningful ways and determined that President Waters should go. In June of 1900 her constant efforts at activating her network were rewarded. She recorded that there was a, "most important alumnae meeting (with) much excitement." The next day, at the annual board of trustees meeting Dr. Waters' resignation was accepted.[15]

Throughout the spring of 1900 and the following year, Smith held frequent meetings with a Professor Freley, her candidate for president of the school. She was only partially successful in this effort and he served as "acting president" from 1900 to 1904. With remarkable consistency, Smith started to write derogatory comments about Freley as soon as he began to serve

as president.[16]

Part of the governance difficulty at Wells during this time period resulted from the fact that dynamic male educators were drawn to the new universities. The men who came to Wells as presidents were simply not a first-rate group. Smith, on the other hand, was a member of a smalle, elite group of women educators who were embarked on a relatively new career path. Ambitious and dedicated to their fledgling institutions, such women, in all liklihood, were much more capable than their male superiors. Conflict was destined to erupt.

Eventually, Dean Smith's "majestic dignity" was no longer sufficient to maintain her control at the school. However, she kept her position on the board of trustees and it was after her resignation as dean that she was part of a successful coup by the female network she was so instrumental in creating. Dr. Ward, the handsome, impressive president hired in 1905, was most noted for his frequent absences from the Wells campus, particularly during the cold upstate New York winters. It has since been learned that he was serving as president of another college in Florida throughout his tenure at Wells. At the time all that seems to have been known was that his prolonged absences were demoralizing to the faculty, and his reversals on decisions made during his absences were confusing to students. Among the trustees there was an ad hoc coalition of alumnae, the husbands of alumnae, and Helen Fairchild Smith. This group was instrumental in the dismissal of Dr. Ward. They stated in a letter to the entire board, "We felt it would be kinder to let the resignation appear to come from his own initiative....(We) merely offered the president an alternative and he took it."[17]

Despite such seemingly sweet passivity, the women, according to their adversaries, were the initiators of the dismissal procedure. One member of the board termed the actions, "sudden, undignified, and hysterical"; adjectives that surely characterize the committee as feminine.[18]

The private network, forged earlier, had grown strong enough to replace a president with support of his own on the board. By 1913, eight out of nineteen board members were female. Public power, as traditionally defined, was, at Wells College, in the hands of women and their male allies.

Significant as the transition in governance was to the collegiate experience of the young women who attended Wells, other internal developments also played a part in the reality of the school. The relative isolation of Aurora, the closeness of the town and the college, and the family ties between many of the students and authority figures at the school created in the early years a sense of ownership and uniqueness that made alumnae intensely loyal and enabled ambitious officials to count on these women for support, both economically and politically.

There were 158 instructors for the 1,600 students who attended Wells College during the years studied. Only 43 of the instructors during those years were male. 9 of the men were presidents or acting presidents. The reality at Wells, despite the visibility of male authority figures, was that the students were taught by comparatively few men, most of whom were married and lived off-campus. The great majority of their instructors were single women living in the same housing unit as the students or nearby. Thus, the college "home" resembled a married brother-single sister social environment rather than a husband-wife model for male/female relationships.[19]

During the years 1875 to 1910, Wells College was transformed from an institution unsure of its mission, image, or role, to a women's college, secure among other institutions of higher education. It provided a distinctly female environment which translated the ideals of the larger world into a femininist mode better able to meet the needs and aspirations of its students. The governance of the school, initally largely dictated by the financial and moral constraints imposed by its entrpreneurial founders, while still in the hands of male authority figures, was equally susceptible to the

wishes and desires of a female network composed of alumnae, female faculty, and female members of the board of trustees. The faculty reflected the increasing professionalization of certain spheres for women and provided an academic home for the credentialed women emerging from the graduate schools of the new coeducational universities, the coordinate schools for women, and other women's colleges. The curricula at Wells, along with the disappearance of the preparatory students, insured for Wells acceptance among the best liberal arts colleges of the day. Social activities on campus reflected more and more student awareness of the larger issues of their time and the role educated women could play in such events. Many individual Wells students utilized their training to support their alma mater and to create useful lives for themselves. All had been exposed to an academic environment unavailable to their mothers and grandmothers, an environment founded by men but defined by women.

FOOTNOTES

1. See the works of Bernard Bailyn, Lawrence A. Cremin, and James Axtell.

2. Wells was originally chartered as a seminary but the charter was changed to that of a college in 1870.

3. On dedication day, July, 1866, there were several posters hung up. One of them said, "Wells Seminary and Cornell University-'It is not good for man to be alone.'" Aurora Gazette. July 18, 1866 (Aurora, New York: WCA). For further discussion of Mr. Wells's intentions see: Anne J. Russ, Higher Education For Women: Intent, Reality, and Outcomes, Wells College, 1868-1913. (PhD Thesis: Cornell University, 1980).

4. In 1906, a graduate stated, "Some have decided to teach, some to keep on with their studies while others are contemplating settlement work." Katherine Brookfield Burgess. Folder marked, "Commencement, 1906," (Aurora, New York: WCA).

5. Elisabeth Morss, Folder marked, "Commencement, 1913" (Aurora, New York: WCA).

6. Increasingly, throughout the nineteenth century, diary keeping came to be viewed as a particularly feminine mode of expression for private thoughts and concerns. Men's journals, when they kept them, tended to catalogue public external events. For an example of this contrast see the Diaries of E. B. Morgan. (Aurora, New York: WCA).

7. An excellent discussion of this phenomenon may be found in Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture. An example is the memorial Ninety Beautiful Years, 1808-1899 written by Helen Fairchild Smith when her mother died and published by the college. (Aurora, New York: WCA) NOTE: The honorific title, "Madame", for Mrs. Smith is also an indicator of this development.

8. Helen Fairchild Smith, Diaries, 1888, 1889, 1890, 1891. (Aurora, New York: WCA).

9. "After examination Miss S(mith) is going to continue her readings from 8 to 9, then the girls crawl behind the sofas, slide down on the floor and go fast to sleep until Miss Smith is through reading. . . . Miss Smith's got a new dodge on the girls now. At eight o'clock the dining room doors are locked and whoever is late goes without their breakfast. It's mean to be so treated." Sophie Marguerite Ames, "Letters from a Wells Girl to her Sister," January, 1877 to June, 1879 (Aurora, New York: WCA).

10. "Book of Letters Written by Helen Fairchild Smith and W. E. Waters to Students, Parents, and Business Associates, 1894-1898" (Aurora, New York: WCA).

11. Helen Fairchild Smith, Diary, July, 1896 (Aurora, New York: WCA). Miss Jeanneret taught at Wells twelve years. Miss Wood taught there seven years. "Faculty Roster" (Aurora, New York: WCA).

12. "A paper read by Dr. W.--my remarks followed. . . . Dr. W. replied to my remarks with much personal feeling (said) 'Miss J(eanneret) depressed and dominated the faculty. Miss Wood 'looked' so.' We adjourned. . . . I find no one to uphold me - quite alone in that place." Ibid., September 12, 1896.

13. "Another outrageous note from Dr. Waters regarding - specials, dancing, etc. . . . Dr. Waters came in and said he began to believe I was right - etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc., O, O, O! . . . Another wretched note from Dr. W." Helen Fairchild Smith, Diary, March 22-25, 1898. (Aurora, New York: WCA).

14. As one professor commented, "(President Waters) continued until the end of his life to be . . . . more capable than anyone I have ever known of saying the wrong thing in the wrong place." Anna Reese Pugh, "Memoirs". This tendency is also evident in letters he wrote to Dr. J. M. Townsend, January 5, 1898; N. L. Zabriskie (chairman of the board of trustees), April 2, 1898; Miss Bessie Murray, April 21, 1898. "President's Letter Book" (Aurora, New York: WCA).

15. Helen Fairchild Smith, Diary, June 12-20, 1900. (Aurora, New York: WCA).

16. "Executive Committee Meeting and the ACTING President is rightly named! . . . Had a long talk with Prof. Freley and really lost patience I am sorry to say." Helen Fairchild Smith, Diary, October, 1900. (Aurora, New York: WCA).

17. Jean Davis, "A Rambling Memoir of Mrs. Grover Cleveland and Some Related History", pp. 14-21. (Aurora, New York: WCA).

18. The irate board member, Thomas Mott Osborne of Auburn, was an ardent prison reformer noted for his intense likes and dislikes. NOTE: For a good discussion of the meaning of "hysterical" as it applied to women in the nineteenth- century see For Her Own Good: One-Hundred and Fifty Years of Medical Advice to Women.

19. For further discussion of this phenomenon see: Anne J. Russ, Higher Education For Women: Intent, Reality and Outcomes, Wells College, 1868-1913. (PhD Thesis: Cornell University, 1980).